2018 Joint Meeting of the Executive Boards
UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP

Background Paper – Topic 3

"Overcoming inequalities among and within countries, including gender inequality, to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals – reaching the poorest and most vulnerable populations first"

This background paper will serve to inform the afternoon session on the above-mentioned topic at the Joint Meeting of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP on 1 June 2018.

I.   INTRODUCTION

1.   Inequalities – whether a consequence of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status – are intersecting and pervasive both within and between countries. Inequalities hold back social, economic and environmental prosperity, distort democratic governance systems, can fuel conflict, and are a barrier to the realization of fundamental human rights.

2.   The growing concentration of income and wealth, however, shows little sign of reversing. Indeed, despite unprecedented poverty reduction and rapid growth in emerging economies, income inequality has increased in nearly all countries since 1980. Over the past 25 years, the average daily income of the world's poorest 20 per cent has risen by a significantly smaller margin [$0.79] than that of the other 80 per cent [$8.91]. Increasing income inequality and large transfers of wealth from public to private hands, over the past 40 years, have resulted in large and increasing inequality in wealth. If current trends continue, estimates suggest that the richest one per cent will control nearly 66 per cent of the world's wealth by 2030.

3.   The many dimensions of inequality are deeply intertwined. For example, analysis of 35 countries with sufficient disaggregated data shows that women aged 20-24 years from rich households are far less likely to marry (or cohabit) before the age of 18 and far more likely to complete their education than are women living in poor households. A girl who is born into a poor household and forced into early marriage is more likely to drop out of school, give birth at an early age, suffer complications during childbirth, and experience violence, than a girl from a higher-income household who marries after reaching the age of adulthood. Gender, age, class, ethnic identity and location often intersect to aggravate and reinforce relative disadvantage and deprivation.

4.   Rising levels of inequality and pervasive discrimination are not inevitable: institutions, policies and practices make a difference. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reflects a new determination among Member States to address intersecting inequalities and break entrenched cycles of discrimination and disadvantage. The 2030 Agenda recognizes the risks of 'rising inequalities within and among countries', 'enormous disparities of opportunity, wealth and power', and persistent 'gender inequality' as 'immense challenges' confronting the world today. The framework tackles inequalities as a crosscutting issue, as well as making it the focus of specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as SDG 10, which aims to reduce inequalities within and between countries; and SDG 5, aimed at achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. The 2030 Agenda is firmly rooted in human rights principles and includes an overarching principle of 'leave no one behind' to ensure that the poorest and most vulnerable populations are prioritized in efforts to achieve sustainable development.

5.   The United Nations System Chief Executives Board (CEB) adopted a Statement of Commitment in December 2015, obliging CEB member organizations to put combatting inequalities and discrimination and the pledge to 'leave no one behind' at the centre of their strategic frameworks, policy guidance and global plans of action. The new 2017 guidance on the United Nations Development Assistance Framework and a forthcoming UNDG Guide on 'Leaving No One Behind' aim to guide and enable United Nations country teams to operationalize these commitments.

II.   KEY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

6.   Inequalities in wealth and income lead to a cascade of consequential social inequalities, such as better housing, energy, connectivity, health care, education, and related social benefits. Hence the central importance of wealth inequality

to other social disparities. At the same time, disparities in social benefits also arise from gender discrimination, racism, nativism, or xenophobia – irrespective of wealth. In the worst case, wealth and discriminatory inequalities are mutually reinforcing over time – contributing to macrohistoric disparities between populations, and between nations.

7. The intergenerational nature of historic inequalities means that addressing inequalities in resources may fix some types of inequality relatively quickly, while others remain entrenched. This is why policy experts underline the importance of focusing not only on resources, but also on inequalities in opportunities and outcomes to track progress.

8. People experience inequalities in many different ways. They may have less influence on decisions that affect them, or less ability to exercise their rights and be heard. They may face discrimination in the labour market; have less ability to prevent injury, illness or injustice. They may be shut out of markets and financial services and have poorer quality education, legal or health services. They may suffer more acutely or be less likely to escape natural disasters and endure livelihood shocks of various kinds. They may have less access to high-quality technology and thus be less able to benefit from the new opportunities they can bring.

9. Identifying and reaching marginalized groups, and designing and implementing rights-based policies to redress the multiple deprivations they experience, requires inclusive, participatory processes. Robust and timely data – disaggregated by sex, age, and other characteristics, including, for example, income, geographic location, race, ethnicity, migratory status and disability – are needed to inform such participatory processes. However, scarcity of data and limited sample sizes in existing datasets pose significant challenges for identifying and monitoring the status of those furthest behind. Investing in national statistical capacities, particularly in developing countries, is central to this endeavour.

10. While data are needed to inform decision-making and contribute to holding duty-bearers to account, creating a positive feedback loop requires a sea change in democratic governance. This requires safe and inclusive spaces for public debate where civil society organizations are able to participate to shape national priorities and identify what is working well, where the gaps are, and what needs to be done to enable transformative changes.

11. Replacing discriminatory policies, legislation and social norms with those that are rights-based, is a key area for public action. Laws that establish equal rights between women and men provide an important basis for demanding and achieving equality in practice. Yet making equality real requires more than legal reform. The translation of equality before the law into equality of outcomes is not automatic. Even where gender-equal laws are in place, for example, entrenched inequalities, discriminatory social norms and harmful customary practices can undermine their implementation and positive impact. Laws need to be translated into policies and programmes and, critically, laws need to be complemented with adequate budgetary allocations to ensure their implementation. One of the key challenges that marginalized groups face when their human rights are violated because of low-quality services, lack of information or disrespectful and abusive behaviour is that there are few mechanisms to bring attention to these violations and seek redress. National ombudsmen, human rights commissions, consumer forums, patients' rights associations and similar institutions can play an important role in filling these gaps.

12. Another critical precondition for combating intersecting inequalities is by creating sustainable livelihoods for all. However, far from being an automatic by-product of economic growth, in recent decades many countries have struggled to generate decent work and instead have experienced bouts of 'jobless growth'. Livelihood challenges are particularly daunting in post-conflict settings where key institutions for effective macroeconomic management, including functioning bond markets and progressive taxation systems, have been damaged or destroyed.

13. When demand for labour grows slowly relative to supply, levels of unemployment increase, informal employment expands, and other atypical and non-standard forms of work – such as involuntary part-time work – proliferate. A reduced share of public-sector jobs in overall employment reinforces this trend. The result is a downward pressure on wages and conditions of work. This has happened at a time when in many parts of the world women's labour force participation has increased, and a disproportionate number, especially women from low-income and marginalized groups, are finding themselves either without paid work or working in the informal economy without access to social protection.

14. Insecure livelihoods and inadequate income lie at the root of hunger: if people go hungry, it is often because food is unaffordable, not because it is unavailable. As The True Cost of a Plate of Food study of WFP shows, in low-income countries, buying the ingredients for a single meal can absorb a significant portion of a person's earnings or household's income. Where there is conflict or economic collapse, food purchase can exceed earnings outright. Furthermore, gender inequalities in livelihoods, such as women's lower levels of personal income and more limited access to productive resources including land, credit and technology, reduces women's bargaining power within and beyond their households, eroding their ability to control household resources, re-negotiate unpaid care responsibilities and exit abusive relationships.

15. Time that is allocated to income-generating work has to be balanced against the time needed to attend to the day-to-day care and 'repair' of human beings; this work is often unpaid, underrecognized, undervalued and overwhelmingly assigned to women. Caring for young children to ensure that they receive adequate nutrition, cognitive development and socialization has long-term socioeconomic implications. When social infrastructure – water and sanitation services, healthcare, childcare services, transportation, among others – are out of reach or of poor quality, the burden of procuring them (both in terms of time and monetary cost) falls disproportionately on the shoulders of women and girls. While women from better-off families can delegate (or 'out-source') some of this critical work to paid caregivers (e.g. paid domestic workers) when they seek income-generating work, this is not an option for many poor women. Women from low-income households face harsh trade-offs between providing care for their dependents and earning an income to keep their families out of poverty.

16. Investments in the social infrastructure (e.g. water and sanitation, transportation), accessible, affordable and quality social services (e.g. health, including reproductive health, education, care services) and social protection measures (e.g. paid maternity leave, security in old age) are critical preconditions for enabling decent livelihoods and reducing inequalities. Specific measures and tailored services, embedded within universal policies and programmes, are the best way to reach the most marginalized groups. Sexual and reproductive health care is a case in point: all women and young people need access to comprehensive family planning, since achieving the full range of their human rights depends fundamentally on their ability to decide on the timing and number of children. However, within universal service provision, special targeting and positive action may also be needed to reach the most marginalized groups of women and youth, for example, indigenous women or those living in remote rural areas or in urban slums. For infrastructure projects, adequate investments are needed that are suited to the needs of whole communities, including women and girls. Many construction designs bear an implicit gender bias, with a lack of gender considerations in project specifications. For example, a school without potable water or appropriate sanitation facilities is more likely to cause low attendance rates for girls.

17. Investing in appropriate infrastructure, services and technologies requires adequate levels of financing and democratic accountability to ensure that sufficient resources are mobilized, invested and utilized to produce the desired outcomes. The viability of different resource mobilization strategies and instruments varies across countries and contexts. The resources available to Governments for implementing the 2030 Agenda are neither finite nor fixed; they are determined by taxation policies, international cooperation, decisions over deficit spending and the management of debt, trade, monetary policy and financial regulation. This means that there is scope for increasing revenue from both domestic and external sources. Strengthening progressive taxation, including in relation to corporate profits, personal income, property and inheritance and natural resources, and strengthening the efficiency of collection and compliance are effective strategies for mobilizing domestic resources.

18. Domestic resource mobilization, however, faces many challenges, including some that are global in nature. The wealth currently held in tax havens is equivalent to more than 10 per cent of the global gross domestic product; and has increased considerably since the 1970s. In 2012, the financial resources flowing out of developing countries (in part through tax evasion and capital flight) were three times greater than the amount of aid flowing in. Offshore tax havens pose a global problem in terms of facilitating money laundering and tax evasion, contributing to high levels of global wealth inequality and requiring global solutions.

19. Debates over resource mobilization cannot be separated from questions on how foreign and domestic resources are spent. Mechanisms such as participatory gender-responsive planning and budgeting and social audits can enhance accountability and promote equitable resource management. Such practices can contribute to greater trust between the State and citizens, enhanced domestic resource mobilization and more equitable and effective use of public funds. When public spending decisions are transparent and fair, and where citizens reap clear benefits from public services, their willingness to contribute to funding them through taxation is also likely to increase.

III. LESSONS LEARNED

20. The 2030 Agenda is grounded in human rights, declaring an intention to 'realize the human rights of all'. The agenda is 'to be implemented in a manner that is consistent with the rights and obligations under international law' which includes multiple obligations to combat discrimination and inequalities. It emphasizes the responsibilities of all States are 'to respect, protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms for all', who are directed to 'ensure equal opportunity' and to 'reduce inequalities of outcome'.

21. In practice, a human rights-based approach to policy and programming should integrate several key features, including: prioritizing the most marginalized and excluded groups, aiming to reduce disparities; participation both as a means and as a goal, recognizing people as key actors in their own development; a focus on underlying structural causes of poverty and discrimination; improving accountability mechanisms; and strengthening coherence between international human rights standards and economic and development policy and programmes. The examples below highlight how a human rights-based approach has been integrated into the work of United Nations agencies to redress inequalities, including gender inequality, and achieve sustainable development for all.

Inclusive economies and universal social protection

22.   Sustained opportunities for employment that generate an adequate income and provide decent conditions of work are fundamental to levelling the playing field, and when it comes to addressing intersecting inequalities, the design of social protection systems matters. Building inclusive economies that respond to the needs of the most marginalized groups requires an integrated approach to economic and social policymaking, addressing both inequalities in resources and opportunities, and discrimination.

23.   Addressing the metrics that define 'who is furthest behind' can be particularly fruitful. Analysis of eligibility criteria for social assistance in the Caribbean region revealed serious gender bias in the design of the proxy mean tests, which were denying vulnerable populations crucial access to social protection. UNICEF and UN-Women provided recommendations on how the gender sensitivity of proxy mean tests in the region could be improved, and as a result, sex-differentiated equivalence scales were eliminated and the weight assigned to children was raised.

24.   There are 52 million domestic workers in the world, most of them women, many of them from racial or ethnic minorities, often working in vulnerable employment. These workers have been at the forefront of advocacy to demand ILO Convention 189 on domestic work, as well as its ratification and implementation at national level. In Brazil, advocacy efforts led by the National Federation of Domestic Workers supported by UN-Women, were crucial in this process, and led to new laws and policies to extend full labour rights, including those related to work hours, overtime pay, safety, health standards and paid leave to 7 million domestic workers.

25.   Coordinated multi-partner efforts for a given population that simultaneously address multiple – economic and social – deprivations are especially effective. For example, as urban-rural income and social inequalities become more pronounced in many countries, the rights of rural women to demand multisectoral attention becomes particularly important. Such needs are being addressed in the work of FAO, IFAD, UN-Women and WFP through the Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Liberia, Nepal, Niger, Kyrgyzstan and Rwanda. Sequenced interventions have focused on promoting women's equal participation in rural communities, increasing their access to markets, knowledge and technology for sustainable agriculture, and support for legal reforms- and the multifaceted approach is having a positive impact. Women's cooperatives and networks have also been supported by UNDP as a way to link women with markets and provide access to social protection, including in Myanmar and India.

26.   The participation of people living in poverty and experiencing multiple deprivations in identifying problems and policy and programmatic solutions is a central part of the accountability process. For example, people living with disabilities make up an estimated 15 per cent of the world's population and often face very high rates of sexual violence and violations of their reproductive rights. The WE DECIDE Youth and Women with Disabilities initiative of UNFPA works directly with young people to develop accessible sexual and reproductive health materials, and guidelines for strengthening service provision. The programme is also working to build evidence and knowledge by strengthening statistics on disability and sexual and reproductive health and advocating with Governments to include questions on disability in their upcoming censuses.

27.   In the health domain, integrated approaches are equally important, with optimal results from coordinated programmes involving multiple United Nations agencies – to simultaneously improve metrics on the burden of illness, human resources, infrastructure and commodities, and human behaviour, within an overall commitment to universal health coverage. For example, UNOPS and UNICEF have recognized the importance of adequate infrastructure on overcoming inequalities and have targeted the rehabilitation of health facilities in low-income communities across Kenya, aimed at bringing down the very high levels of maternal mortality. Besides training staff on the use and maintenance of the new facilities, the organizations also provided solar panels, which help to ensure a consistent source of electricity, providing an integrated model for sustainable services.

Locating those furthest behind

28.   Investing in national statistical capacities, particularly in developing countries, is central to overcoming inequalities within and between countries. The focus on data disaggregation within Agenda 2030 has deepened investments by national Governments, and expanded support from United Nations agencies, to strengthen national data systems. One simple but important lesson is that when inequalities can be mapped and visualized, they motivate change. While progress is slow, the number of Governments mapping their health and development data is growing, and motivating further efforts to improve coverage, quality and frequency of data. Nonetheless, far greater technical, human and financial resources will be needed to assure that all national data systems have the capacity to visualize disparities, especially for gender statistics, which suffer from chronic underinvestment.

29.   High-quality geospatial data and new estimation methods offer new tools for identifying inequalities and redistributing national services to improve access to basic services. A key lesson is that more components can be drawn and refined from open software, substantially reducing costs and giving Governments greater independence in maintaining their systems. United Nations initiatives such as the Global Geospatial Information Management are advancing geospatial data quality in a range of countries, and the UNFPA partnership on Geo-Referenced Infrastructure and Demographic Data for Development (GRID) supports Governments to generate and use georeferenced data to map

inequalities at the lowest geographical level. Such data systems are already contributing to a more equitable distribution of health services in a wide range of locations, including bed net distribution in Zambia, immunization and vaccination coverage in Nigeria, and emergency obstetric care facilities in Togo.

30.   Stronger data systems can also identify those at risk of environmental crisis or hazards due to climate change, which disproportionately affect the poor and reinforce inequalities. Revealing the geographic distribution of those exposed to environmental risk underpins multiple United Nations efforts to improve preparedness and disaster risk reduction – and these can be scaled up in more countries. For example, with support from UNDP, gender-responsive strategies for disaster reduction and climate change adaptation and mitigation have been developed in multiple countries, including support and training for community-based disaster risk management initiatives with local organizations.

Changing discriminatory social norms

31.   Even where progressive laws and policies are in place, discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes, which justify and reinforce inequalities, can hamper implementation and change. Addressing discriminatory social norms is critical to efforts for redressing inequalities and dismantling gender discriminatory practices, such as gender-based violence, female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriage. Doing so requires working in multiple ways and on different levels, rather than as simple, stand-alone interventions. Programmes need to engage schools, communities, employers, civil society, the media, and women, men, girls and boys in the transformation.

32.   UNFPA and UNICEF have two such joint programmes, both characterized by integrated approaches: one to accelerate the abandonment of female genital mutilation (FGM), which works in 17 countries; and the other the global programme to accelerate action to end child marriage, operating in 12 countries. Both programmes have targeted legal and policy reform, alongside work with grassroots community groups to challenge harmful social norms. To date, the joint programme combatting FGM has catalysed the public abandonment of the harmful practice in over 21,700 communities involving nearly 32 million people. Meanwhile, the joint programme against child marriage has reached 1.7 million individuals through community-based behavioural change and sensitization activities, including multiple interventions – community dialogues, media, interactive folk theatre, as well as partnerships and advocacy with faith-based organizations and religious and traditional leaders.

IV.   CONCLUSION

33.   The analysis and examples presented attest to large disparities within and between countries across a wide range of SDG-related outcomes, and highlight the importance of integrated and multidimensional approaches to address the complexity of entrenched inequalities. Gender inequalities intersect with other inequalities to create striking disparities, which, if not systematically addressed, will stymie progress on the 2030 Agenda.

V.   QUESTIONS FOR THE BOARD TO CONSIDER

1.   What role can Executive Board members play in accelerating action and accountability on reducing inequalities to achieve the SDGs, particularly SDG 5 and SDG 10?

2.   Knowing the challenges and possibilities for overcoming inequalities, what can be done now to produce tangible shifts towards greater equality, particularly by prioritizing the rights of the poorest and most marginalized populations?

3.   How can legal reforms, shifts in social norms, and changes in economic and social policies coalesce to address the deep, extensive pockets of deprivation that pervade the lives of the most marginalized groups?

4.   How can data and statistical systems play a more effective role in identifying those who are most at risk of being left behind?

5.   How can policy successes ('good practices') be tailored and adapted to different socioeconomic and cultural environments as well as different regions?

6.   How can marginalized social groups actively participate in shaping actions that aim to address their rights while holding all duty-bearers to account?

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